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UNCLAS THE HAGUE 001566

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SUBJECT: DUTCH PARLIAMENT ENDORSES CABINET DECISION TO
EXTEND IRAQ DEPLOYMENT

REF: The Hague 1454

1. (U) An overwhelming majority of the Dutch Parliament voted on June 22 to endorse the cabinet decision to extend Dutch participation in the multinational force in Iraq for eight months. (The Dutch have approximately 1300 troops serving in Al Muthanna province as part of the UK's Multinational Division SE.) Only the left Socialist and Green Left parties and three dissident members of the main opposition Labor (PvdA) Party (in total 19 of 150 members) opposed extension. Although the Labor party had publicly opposed extension in recent months, PvdA spokesman Koenders stated during the debate that his party had been convinced by the government's arguments to remain in Iraq, and that adoption of UNSCR 1546 had been a decisive factor in the party's endorsement.

2. (U) Although extension is an executive decision, which only requires the cabinet's approval, Prime Minister Balkenende, Foreign Minister Bot and Defense Minister Kamp spent much time generating broad support for the decision in parliament. A broad parliamentary endorsement was also viewed as vital to the troops' morale and retaining public support. The cabinet deliberately postponed making a decision on extension one week - from June 4 to June 11 - to allow UNSCR 1546 to be adopted. These efforts clearly paid off.

3. (U) Much of the debate in parliament focused on the duration of the extension. Some parties did not want to rule out another extension beyond the present eight months, but FM Bot stated that "longer is not under discussion." One major argument for the proposed extension was to have the Dutch troops provide security before and during the elections, which should be held by January 2005. In Bot's view, there is accordingly a safe margin between the elections and the planned withdrawal by mid-March 2005. Bot did not, however, completely rule out that the Dutch troops may have to stay longer if exceptional circumstances were to occur, but stated that in that case the government would again seek the parliament's endorsement.

4. (SBU) Comment: The broad parliamentary endorsement of the cabinet's decision, to include the main opposition, represents a significant victory for Balkenende, Bot and Kamp. Dutch governments always prefer to make potentially controversial decisions (such as military deployments) backed by a super-majority in parliament. In this case, the cabinet was not only prepared to proceed without Labor's backing, but also if necessary without the support of its own junior coalition partner, the Liberal Democrats (D66) which had also expressed concern about extension. The proposal and subsequent passage of UNSCR 1546 - and the cabinet's decision to delay action for a week to ensure that a resolution was in place - allowed D66 and then PvdA to climb down from their earlier opposition to extension relatively smoothly. Depending on the evolution of the political process in Iraq, Balkenende, Bot and Kamp will likely have to repeat this process come January 2005 should further extension of the Dutch deployment be required. End Comment.

MINIMIZED CONSIDERED

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